

“WHAT TO DO WITH ALL THAT STUFF”

A Resource Guide



Senator Liz Krueger's
BEST PRACTICES FOR CLUTTER & HOARDING

SECOND EDITION

All of us have a special relationship with things and that relationship is in some ways magical. We get carried away with those attachments and — while that could get more of us into trouble with our possessions — most of us are able to decide when an object begins to interfere with our life. We do something about it at that point. That's the thing that's so troublesome for people who hoard: when the object begins to interfere, they simply put up with it rather than deal with the item.

- Randy Frost, co-author

Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things

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Dear Neighbor,

My office receives many calls from constituents who find themselves in difficult situations because of their overly cluttered apartments, including the risk of eviction.

Dismayed by the number of residents who are not only in danger of losing their homes, but also negatively affecting their own quality of life and that of their neighbors, I held a workshop designed to help constituents determine if their clutter was becoming a problem, and to provide resources to help individuals address serious clutter issues, as well as neighbors, friends, and family who are impacted.

Hoarding and unnecessarily cluttered apartments in an urban setting like New York City create unique challenges. The walls of our homes are most often shared with our neighbors. What this means is that *what we do in the privacy of our own homes frequently impacts the quality of life of those living near us*. Some of the issues that confront those living near an apartment that is overly cluttered are fire hazards, foul smells and odors, and rodent and insect infestations. Because it is a building owner's responsibility to keep all tenants safe, extensive clutter and hoarding can be grounds for eviction.

We know that difficulties with hoarding are widespread throughout New York City and that there is no single clear solution to the problem. However, there are some best practices that can help ameliorate the situation for many residents. This booklet is an attempt to create awareness and to offer resources for both professionals as well as residents who are dealing with this on a daily basis.

As you read through this guide, you will understand why this is not a simple problem to alleviate. Cleaning out an apartment demands physical labor, is emotionally challenging, and often costs a lot of money. Private cleaning companies can charge many thousands of dollars to clean a "hoarded-out" apartment.

The constituents who call my office for help are often elderly and do not have the ability or resources to have their apartments restored to a safe and habitable condition. When there is no support network of family or friends willing or able to assist, these tenants, co-op shareholders, and condo owners are often referred to Adult Protective Services (APS). Our research has indicated that APS is the *only* government agency that can address this situation. In some cases, APS involvement can result in the placement of an aide to help the person with activities of daily life; or in extreme situations, moving the person to a more appropriate care situation.

I would like to thank the many organizations and individuals who came together to help us start this conversation several years ago. I would also like to thank APS, Project Ore, a program of the Educational Alliance, and the staff of Assembly Member Rebecca Seawright's office for helping to update this guide.

The purpose of this hoarding guide is to educate New Yorkers about the issues of extreme clutter and hoarding, the challenges that these conditions present, and some of the best practices and resources that are available to begin meeting those challenges. It is my hope that this publication will serve these purposes.

While my staff and I have done our best to ensure that the information contained in this guide is accurate and up to date, there is always more that we can learn. Please refer to the list of resources and additional reading material at the back of this booklet for further information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Liz Krueger". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Liz Krueger
State Senator

About Compulsive Hoarding

Collecting is a very common hobby. Many collections are started when people are young and they grow over time.

Hoarding behavior is different from collecting and can be distinguished primarily by the following:

- Excessive acquisition of items, even some that might seem to others to lack monetary or sentimental value
- Intense attachment to belongings
- Clutter that prevents living spaces from being used as they are meant to be
- Interference or distress with day-to-day activities

Increased attention to hoarding has led researchers to look at other signs of hoarding. **Here is a list of some commonly shared experiences:**

- Difficulty deciding if something is valuable or useful
- Feeling it is impossible to get rid of any belongings or items that have been acquired
- Clutter making living spaces unusable
- Worry over accidentally getting rid of something important that is mixed into a pile of belongings
- Losing important items like money, bills, and significant documents within the clutter
- Difficulty turning down free items, even if they are not needed
- Persistently buying items on sale to “stock up”, even if there is no money, space, or need to do so
- Not inviting visitors into the home because of worry of what they might think of excessive clutter
- Emotional distress over everything that is in a living space

- Fear of losing belongings
- Emotional pain when trying to get rid of belongings to make room for repairs or for use of living space
- Refusing to let people into the home to make needed repairs
- Inability to maintain a habitable space after a clean-out

Who struggles with hoarding?

As early as adolescence, people can begin hoarding items. The average age of an individual that is seeking some sort of help for hoarding is approximately 50 years old. People from every age cohort, from teenagers to older adults, and from all economic backgrounds have expressed personal challenges with hoarding.

A background of poverty is not found to increase the likelihood that someone will hoard, disputing the myth that holding onto an excessive amount of items is an effort to be frugal and prepared “just in case”. There is no one “type” of person that hoards belongings.

What kinds of items are most often hoarded?

Most people that hoard keep an excessive amount of commonly held items such as newspapers, mail, books, flyers, boxes, bags, and clothes. Less commonly kept items include garbage and animals.

For more information on why getting rid of clutter can be so physically and emotionally difficult for hoarders, please visit the OCD International website at:

<https://hoarding.iocdf.org/>

Test Yourself

Now that you have an idea of what hoarding is, the following are three self-administered tests to determine whether you or someone you know might have hoarding behavior. The first two tests come from the International OCD Foundation, at <https://hoarding.iocdf.org/>.

Hoarding Behavior Checklist

Answer yes or no to the following questions. Do you:

- Have difficulty getting rid of items?
- Have a large amount of clutter in the office, at home, in the car, or in other spaces that makes it difficult to use furniture or appliances or move around easily?
- Often lose important items like money or bills in the clutter?
- Feel overwhelmed by the volume of possessions that have “taken over” the house or workspace?
- Find it difficult to stop taking free items, such as advertising flyers or sugar packets from restaurants?
- Buy things because they are a “bargain” or to “stock up”?
- Avoid inviting family or friends into your home due to shame or embarrassment?
- Refuse to let people into your home to make repairs?

If you answered yes to one or more of the above questions, you may have a problem with hoarding.

Clutter Image Rating Scale

Since people have different opinions on what “too much” stuff looks like, a group of researchers put together this tool to help individuals “measure” clutter.

Pick the image that looks most like your living space. In general, a level of picture 4 or higher might indicate that there are some potential challenges for the person or people who live in the home.



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9

The Hoarding Rating Scale

Answer the items below:

1) Because of the clutter or number of possessions, how difficult is it for you to use the rooms in your home?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Not at all Moderate Extremely Difficult

2) To what extent do you have difficulty discarding (or recycling, selling, giving away) ordinary things that other people would get rid of?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Not at all Moderate Extreme Difficulty

3) To what extent do you experience emotional distress because of clutter, or difficulty discarding, buying or acquiring things?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Not at all Moderate Extreme Difficulty

4) To what extent do you experience impairment in your life (daily routine, job/school, social activities, family activities, financial difficulties) because of clutter, or difficulty discarding, buying or acquiring things?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Not at all Moderate Extreme Difficulty

SCORING: A score of 4 or greater on questions 1 and 2, and a score of 4 or greater on either question 3 or question 4 indicates significant hoarding.

Challenges of Hoarding

Compulsive hoarding presents many challenges, not only for the person who hoards, but for his or her neighbors, friends, and family. Some health and safety issues that arise from hoarding are:

- Misplaced items, such as important documents, money, and/or medications
- Anxiety and depression
- Difficulty maintaining living space

In more extreme cases, the following challenges can be present:

- Falls
- Fire safety
- Insect and rodent infestations
- Dust, mold, and mildew collection
- Lack of proper repairs
- Alienation of friends and family

Fire Hazard

There are special areas of concern when it comes to fire safety in apartment buildings. A home filled with papers, boxes and clutter is a firetrap. Families in apartment buildings live close together, affecting each other's risks associated with fire.

Insect and Rodent Infestations

Clutter affords numerous harboring sites for bed bugs that can't necessarily be treated thoroughly. They may be inside accumulated clothes, magazines, books, and records — just junk in some cases. It creates environments that can't be treated where bed bugs can hide and lay their eggs, and that mice, rats, and other insects find attractive.

Dust, Mold and Mildew Collection

As families, friends and even professional organizers assist in extreme hoarding situations, they start to smell bad odors. In urban apartments, it is often neighbors who complain about odors in the hallway or even seeping into a next door neighbor's apartment. These bad odors come from mold, mildew, rotten food, and rat and mice feces.

Dust, dust mites and accumulating dirt can cause respiratory illness and aggravate asthma. Pet dander—including that of birds—and fur shed from animals also contributes to illnesses. Infants, small children, elderly persons, and occupants with compromised immune systems are most at risk.

Lack of Proper Repairs and Maintenance of Living Space

Hoarders tend to avoid visitors, and often do not allow landlords or building managers into their apartments. This can cause dangerous situations, not only to the tenant, but also to his or her neighbors. An example is a building-wide problem with plumbing that cannot be repaired without access to the hoarder's apartment.

Repeating Patterns of Behavior

One of the greatest challenges of hoarding is that it can be extremely difficult to treat. For some people, cleaning out the living space is only one step toward dealing with a larger issue. Because hoarding behavior is often difficult to change on one's own, ongoing treatment or support for people that struggle with hoarding can limit the chances that a home will be excessively and unsafely cluttered again.

Because many cleaned up units return to a state of unsafe clutter, funding for assistance can be difficult to secure. In an effort to achieve success in maintaining a safe home that is compliant with housing regulations, many individuals with hoarding behavior seek ongoing support or treatment to ensure they do not return to old patterns.

At the back of this booklet you will find support groups that have proved to be a great help, not only during the clean-out process, but also after the home is organized. For some people, maintaining an already cleaned-out space is extremely difficult. They are often being asked to change a lifetime pattern of behavior.

One-on-one counseling by a social worker or other mental health professional can also prove beneficial.

What You Can Do

If you find that you meet the criteria for hoarding or if you have trouble with clutter, the following suggestions could help you focus on the issue and achieve progress in making your space safe and more livable:

- Develop a plan of action that works for you — ask for help if possible in doing so. Make sure you have access to everything you need to engage in activities for daily living (e.g. access to the bed, bathtub, toilet, refrigerator, etc). Most importantly, make sure your plan includes assessing safety risks for fire, and safe passages in the apartment sufficient to allow an emergency worker to get through. Clear access to windows, doors, and fire escapes is particularly important.
- Try not to over-think decisions — determine quickly what to do with something (throw it away, recycle, donate, or put where it belongs).
- Work on de-cluttering for at least 15 minutes every day – set a timer if it helps! Mark off one area at a time for work, control your visual field and link your work to rewards.
- If you have not used an item in a year or more, try to get rid of it.
- Social workers, therapists, psychologists, and psychiatrists can help develop specialized treatment plans.
- Contact and access any of the resources listed at the end of this booklet for additional support and services.

For Families & Friends of People who Hoard

The most important thing that families and friends can do is remember that dealing with hoarding is not as easy as “just cleaning up”. Any efforts to help someone de-clutter their homes may not be well received, so it is also important to keep in mind:

- People who hoard may not be willing to accept help even if it seems like they need it.
- You cannot force someone to be motivated to de-clutter.
- Respect is important to everyone — recognize a person’s decisions and have patience with their pace.
- Understand that people have attachments that you might not have to certain types of objects.
- Develop ideas and plans for keeping the space as safe as possible. An example is moving clutter away from doors and fire exits.
- It is best to avoid discarding any items without first receiving permission of the owner. If you are concerned about a loved one’s safety, consider reaching out to Adult Protective Services (see page 18).

Eviction Proceedings as a Result of Hoarding

Severe hoarding may violate city and state housing regulations and laws. The collection of items and crowded living spaces can have detrimental effects on the well-being of neighbors, cause fire hazards, and endanger the lives of first responders.

It is a building owner's responsibility to ensure the safety of all residents. If a tenant's hoarding is posing a safety risk, the landlord is legally responsible to address the issue. If the tenant does not comply with requests to remedy a situation, a landlord may initiate an eviction case in Housing Court. Eviction cases can also be filed against shareholders in coop buildings based on hoarding.

Housing Court - Usually, a landlord will warn a tenant that the hoarding has reached a serious level and give the tenant an opportunity to clean and declutter the apartment. If the tenant does not take steps to remedy the condition after being warned, or if the condition poses an imminent danger to the safety of others, the landlord will notify the tenant that the tenancy is being terminated. After giving that notice, the landlord can file a holdover case against the tenant in Housing Court. A holdover case is a legal case filed by a landlord to evict a tenant for a reason other than non-payment of rent.

To start a holdover case, the landlord must serve the tenant court papers called a "Petition" and a "Notice of Petition." The papers inform the tenant of the date, time,

and location where he or she must appear in court. If a tenant receives a Notice of Petition and Petition, he or she must appear in court on that date.

Housing Court judges will sometimes grant tenants additional time to clean their apartments if it is clear that they are taking proactive steps to declutter. Once an apartment is cleaned, tenants are often also asked to sign stipulations (written agreements) promising to keep an apartment in a safe and habitable condition and to allow the landlord access for regular inspections.

Any tenant who receives legal papers indicating that a landlord is starting a court case should seek legal advice. It is always best to be represented by an attorney who specializes in tenant law. Depending on income, tenants may be eligible for free legal representation by nonprofit legal services organizations. See page 22 for details about free and private legal services for tenants.

Any tenant who has questions about Housing Court can also contact a nonprofit organization called Housing Court Answers. Housing Court Answers provides information about navigating the court process over the phone, via its website, and in person in each Housing Court building.

For more information about housing court proceedings, visit Housing Court Answers at <http://housingcourtanswers.org/> or call (212) 962-4795.

Adult Protective Services

A division of the NYC Human Resources Administration

If adults, including older adults and people with disabilities, are unable to care for themselves and don't have a network of family or friends willing and/or able to support them, a NYC agency called Adult Protective Services (APS) may be able to provide assistance. The goal of APS is to keep residents as independent as possible while providing assistance and support where it is needed. APS is also the resource for those who present a danger to themselves or to others. *APS is the only government agency that will provide a free clean-out for adults who are living in a "hoarded-out" home.*

APS ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Protective services for adults are provided to individuals 18 years of age and older, regardless of income, who are:

1. Mentally and/or physically impaired;
2. Unable to manage their own resources, carry out the activities of daily living, or protect themselves from abuse, neglect, exploitation, or other hazardous situations; and
3. Have no one available who is willing and/or able to assist them responsibly.

Referrals to APS are accepted for services only if they meet all three criteria.

For assistance or more information, call 311 or the APS Central Intake Unit at (212) 630-1853.

Older Adult Providers

The organizations listed below can also help identify private cleaning services.

CARTER BURDEN NETWORK

Provides referrals for home care services and mental health providers.

415 East 73rd Street

(212) 879-7400

LENOX HILL NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSE

Staff provide clients with assistance in case management, legal help with possible evictions, and mental health referrals.

331 East 70th Street

(212) 744-5022

SEARCH AND CARE

Provides assessment, case management services, and linkages to community resources to address hoarding-related issues.

1844 Second Avenue

(212) 289-5300

STANLEY ISAACS NEIGHBORHOOD CENTER

Provides assessment, case management services, and linkages to community resources to address hoarding related issues.

Case Assistance Walk-In Clinic for adults 60+:

Monday-Friday: 9am-noon and 1pm-4pm

415 East 93rd Street

(212) 360-7620

Local Support Groups and Services

ONLINE HOARDING SUPPORT GROUP

https://hoardingcleanup.com/chat_room

HUDSON GUILD-FULTON CENTER

“Decluttering,” a support group for adults aged 55+, meets on Tuesdays from 10am-noon. If interested, please contact Armishla Mitchell.

444 West 26th Street

212-760-9800, ext. 4004

LENOX HILL NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSE SENIOR CENTER

Decluttering support group meets weekly on Tuesdays from 2:30pm-3:15pm. Open to anyone eligible for services from the NYC Department for the Aging.

343 East 70th Street, Vista Room

212-218-0319

PROJECT ORE—A PROGRAM OF THE EDUCATIONAL ALLIANCE

Provides assessment, case management, and clinical interventions for people with hoarding disorder, as well as linkages to community resources to address hoarding-related issues. Project Ore serves people who live on the East Side of Manhattan between 14th and 79th Streets. If interested, contact Sujenie Badia-Espinal, Assistant Director of Home-Based Services, for more information.

646-395-4524

Mental Health Services

NYC WELL

Operated on behalf of the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, NYC Well provides confidential support and referrals for anyone seeking assistance with mental health and/or substance misuse concerns. All services are free and available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Counselors are available via phone, text, and chat.

888-NYC-WELL (888-692-9355)

<https://nycwell.cityofnewyork.us/en/>

SPOP (SERVICE PROGRAM FOR OLDER PEOPLE)

Provides mental health services for older adults, and can facilitate linkages to partner organizations that assist with clean up.

302 West 91st Street

212-787-7120, Ext. 514

<https://www.spop.org/>

Legal Assistance for Tenants

Free Legal Assistance

Under a NYC law passed in 2017, all tenants with incomes below 200% of the poverty level will have the right to access free legal representation in eviction cases by 2022 (currently approximately \$24,000 for a single person and \$50,000 for a family of four). This new program, administered by the NYC HRA's Office of Civil Justice, is being expanded to additional zip codes each year. As of the publication of this guide, universal access to counsel in eviction cases has not yet expanded to the zip codes in my Senate district (the East Side and Midtown communities of Manhattan). Call 311 and ask for HRA Legal Services, or visit www1.nyc.gov/site/hra/help/legal-services-for-tenants.page, for the latest updates and to see if you live in a covered district.

The following organizations provide legal advice and representation to income-eligible tenants facing eviction in Manhattan. Their capacity is limited, so it is always best to reach out as soon as you receive legal papers.

LEGAL AID SOCIETY

212-577-3300

<https://www.legalaidnyc.org/>

LENOX HILL NEIGHBORHOOD SERVICES LEGAL ADVOCACY

Hosts regular tenants' rights advice clinics at Upper East Side and East Harlem locations. Call or visit the website for dates of upcoming clinics.

212-218-0503

<http://www.lenoxhill.org/legaladvocacy/>

MANHATTAN LEGAL SERVICES

Intake: Monday-Friday from 10am-4pm

917-661-4500

<http://www.legalservicesnyc.org/>

MOBILIZATION FOR JUSTICE

Intake: Wednesday & Friday from 2pm-4:30pm

212-417-3888

<http://mobilizationforjustice.org/>

NEW YORK LEGAL ASSISTANCE GROUP

Intake: Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday from

9am-3pm

212-613-5000

<http://www.nylag.org/>

Private Tenant Attorney Referrals

The **METROPOLITAN COUNCIL ON HOUSING**

maintains a list of private tenant attorneys recommended by tenant advocates on its website at

http://metcouncilonhousing.org/help_and_answers/finding_a_lawyer.

NYC BAR ASSOCIATION LEGAL REFERRAL SERVICE

212-626-7373

<https://www.nycbar.org/get-legal-help/>

Where to Donate Belongings

CITY OPERA THRIFT SHOP

Call to schedule a pick-up or donate in their store. Go online for donation guidelines.

(212) 684-5344

<https://cityoperathriftshop.org/donate>

DONATE NYC

Use DonateNYC to quickly and easily find nearby places to donate a wide variety of used items.

<https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/donate/about/donatenyc.shtml>

HOUSING WORKS THRIFT STORES

Picks up furniture, clothing, and books. Also accepts donations in stores.

888-493-6628

<https://www.housingworks.org/locations>

SALVATION ARMY

Will pick up clothing, furniture, and household items.

800-728-7825

<https://satruck.org/>

VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA

Will pick up clothing, books, electronics, and small furniture.

888-775-8387

<https://pickupplease.org/about-vva/>

Where to Recycle Electronics

LOWER EAST SIDE ECOLOGY CENTER

Will recycle all consumer electronics and guarantee data security. Visit the website to find local collection events.

<https://www.lesecologycenter.org/programs/ewaste/>

STAPLES

Will recycle unwanted technology. Go to the website to find the store location nearest you.

<https://www.staples.com/sbd/cre/marketing/sustainability-center/recycling-services/electronics/>

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